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Was Gramsci a Marxist?

Joel Wainwright

This paper argues that Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is rooted in Marx's theory of value. Although value theory, and Marx's economic writings more generally, are by no means central themes of the Prison Notebooks, they nevertheless shape Gramsci's theoretical disposition and political analysis in fundamental respects. Thus, Gramsci's critique of economism should be seen as an extension of Marx's critique of political economy.

Key Words: Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Value Theory, Fordism

At the 2009 meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Maurice Finocchiaro, distinguished professor of philosophy emeritus at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (and author of two books on Gramsci: Finocchiaro 1988, 1999), was invited to respond to a series of papers presented by a group of self-styled Gramscian geographers, present author included. Finocchiaro opened his remarks by

questioning our interpretation of Gramsci as a Marxist. “What makes Gramsci a Marxist?” Finocchiaro thundered, and not a few geographers replied by promptly leaving the conference room. I saw a few quizzical smiles that seemed to suggest they thought our friendly guest philosopher was off his rocker. Who doesn’t know that Gramsci was a Marxist? Yet, no one bothered to answer Finocchiaro’s question.

For his part, Finocchiaro made some strong arguments. Point one: the concepts the geographers were claiming to draw from Gramsci—hegemony, in particular—are far removed from Marx. Point two: as is quite clear from reading his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci abandoned many of the substantive tenets of Marx’s texts. For instance, Gramsci plainly disagreed with Marx’s argument—in the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*—that capitalism’s own contradictions would inevitably lead to proletarian revolution. Thus, Finocchiaro reasoned, Gramsci’s purported Marxism can only be construed as methodological. But, point three, methodologically Gramsci’s real debt was to *Hegel* (via Marx and Croce). Gramsci inherited this dialectical lineage. We cannot pluck Marx out of this trio to claim that “Gramsci was methodologically a Marxist” unless we add “as well as a Hegelian and a Crocean.” But this diminishes the claim because neither Hegel nor Croce was a communist revolutionary, to put it mildly.

While I cannot accept Finocchiaro’s framing of the issue—particularly since he left out the possibility that Gramsci could be a Marxist on *political* grounds—I think he raises an important question:

The question is whether Gramsci is a Marxist, or to be more precise in what sense or to what extent he is a Marxist ... The interpretation of Gramsci as a Marxist ... may seem to some as so obvious and incontrovertible that it hardly needs mentioning or remarking upon. In my opinion, however, this question deserves discussion. The interpretation of Gramsci as a Marxist is one-sided at best because it is equally important to understand other aspects of Gramsci relating to Benedetto Croce, Machiavelli, and Gaetano Mosca. (Finocchiaro 2009, 2–3)

In raising this question, Finocchiaro is not alone. His arguments resound in counterpoint with another acute Italian reader of Gramsci, Emanuele Saccarelli. Yet whereas Finocchiaro, a Crocean philosopher of science, would like us to interpret Gramsci as a classic thinker who may be read in a plurality of ways (i.e., not exclusively as a Marxist), Saccarelli, a Trotskyist political philosopher, encourages us to depart from Gramsci altogether since, in his view, Gramsci fails to offer any important, novel Marxist ideas (see Saccarelli 2008). Thus, Finocchiaro celebrates Gramsci by arguing that he was not mainly or exclusively a Marxist; Saccarelli condemns Gramsci, contending that he was insufficiently Marxist (and insufficiently Trotskyist). This is an important and incisive pair of critiques. You can argue with one or the other, but between them Finocchiaro and Saccarelli cut away, scissorslike, much of what passes as Gramscian scholarship. They leave someone who feels that Gramsci was a Marxist, and one with important insights for our time, with little ground on which to stand.

In this paper I attempt to reply to Finocchiaro (I cannot address Saccarelli’s criticisms of Gramsci here). I argue that while Gramsci, like most Marxists, did not agree with some of the particulars of Marx’s arguments, he never wavered in emphasizing

the necessity of Marx's core theoretical contribution for the analysis of capitalist society: the theory of value. Not only does his emphasis on Marx's theory of value—alone—demonstrate that Gramsci was indeed a Marxist, but it also clarifies aspects of his theory of hegemony.

1

If one wishes to see how Gramsci uses 'value' (It., *valore*) by scanning his writings, looking for each instance where he employs the word, a complication arises. Most of his uses of the word 'value' concern the worth of things in a noneconomic sense. To take but one instance, consider this passage:

[T]he workers' Factory Council is the first step in a historical process that should lead eventually to the Communist International, no longer as a political organization of the revolutionary proletariat, but as a reorganization of the world economy and of the whole human community . . . The value and historical reality of every revolutionary action today depends on whether it fits into this process, and is designed successfully to free it from the bourgeois superstructures that restrict and obstruct it. (1920, 264)

Gramsci's argument here—that the value of revolutionary activities should be measured against their contribution to the "reorganization of the world economy"—is unmistakably Marxist, and we could reply to Finocchiaro's question on such a basis (I will return to this in my conclusion). But I cite this passage to provide one of the many illustrations of Gramsci's axiological uses of 'value', meaning here 'worth' in a noneconomic sense. In fact, his *Prison Notebooks* could be accurately described as a compendium of evaluations of the concepts or practices (Italian folklore, Pirandello's theatre, Croce's philosophy, and so on) that may or may not be useful for the project of building communist hegemony. Gramsci was quite assertive about the relative value of these things. When Gramsci wrote that it was necessary to compile an inventory of the infinity of traces that constitute a conception of the world (Q11§12; 1971, 323–4), he could have added that the inventory should include a column called 'value'. But what is crucial to recognize is that all his evaluations, taken together, do not add up to a systematic axiology or theory of value. Gramsci never claimed to produce such a thing, and he did not.

Yet Marx did. Now Marx's theory is not, strictly speaking, a work of axiology, but it is nothing if not a theory of value—one that meant an enormous amount to Gramsci.¹ How so?

1. Gramsci's noneconomic valuations and Marx's value theory are indeed different: it is undeniable that Gramsci's 'valuations' are more philological and political than economic in character. Yet they are also intensely interrelated in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci's *Notebooks* are often axiological in tone and substance, yet they are also grounded, as I argue here, in Marx's theory of value. It would be helpful to analyze the precise relationship between Gramsci's reading and appropriation of Marx's theory of value, on the one hand, and his own noneconomic, philological valuations, on the other. But this task lies beyond the scope of this essay.

In the first place, Gramsci took it as axiomatic that value originates in labor and that what distinguishes capitalism as a mode of production is the sale of labor power for the production and sale of commodities. Gramsci explains repeatedly in his *Prison Notebooks* that this alone comprises the basis of 'critical economy', as he refers to Marxist political economy (in contradistinction to 'economic science', which is non-Marxist economics).

When can one speak of a beginning to economic science? ... [F]rom the time that the discovery was made that it is not gold that constitutes wealth ... but labour ... This concept [i.e., labor] ... cannot be submerged into the more generic one of industry and activity but must instead be placed firmly in that human activity which is equally necessary in any social form. This enrichment has been accomplished by critical economy. (Q101I\$25; 1995, 164–5)

So what we call 'economics' today begins with Adam Smith and David Ricardo, a point with which many economists would agree with Gramsci. Yet Gramsci identifies the starting point to their analyses as *value*, which Smith and Ricardo found rooted in *labor*.² Moreover, Gramsci contends that the insights of Smith and Ricardo, however fundamental, remained only latent until Marx's "enrichment" (note the evaluation) of economic thought.³ For Gramsci, as for Marx, the key transformation came via Marx's distinction between labor power and mere "industry and activity." The latter category—the sparks flying off the hammer and anvil, the noise and bustle of a marketplace—was for Smith and Ricardo the essence of economic life and the source of value. Marx's accomplishment was to distinguish between these general aspects of living productive activity, on the one hand, and labor power as a commodity, on the other, and to show how the achievement of this separation was fundamental to capitalist social relations.

This is admittedly only a concise summary of one fragment, but it provides a perspicacious view of Gramsci in his theoretical workshop. Notwithstanding his famous interpretation of the Bolshevik revolution as a "revolution against *Capital*" (1917, 34–7), Gramsci took *Capital* for granted. Frequent citations in his notes on

2. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith writes: "The value of any commodity ... to the person who possesses it, and who means not to use or consume it himself, but to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labor which it enables him to purchase or command. Labor, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities" (Smith 2003, 43). Ricardo begins his *Principles of Political Economy* with Smith's discussion of value, writing: "If the quantity of labor realised in commodities regulate their exchangeable value, every increase of the quantity of labor must augment the value of that commodity on which it is exercised, as every diminution must lower it" (2004, 7). To be sure, their 'labor theory of value' is not at all the same as Marx's (see Karatani 2005, 193–5, 244).

3. Gramsci felt that Marxist and non-Marxist economic thought addressed the same problems using different concepts and languages: "if one wishes to defend the critical conception of economics, one must systematically insist on the fact that orthodox economics does deal with the same problems, albeit in another language, demonstrating this identity of the problems being treated and demonstrating that the critical solution is the superior one" (Q10\$20; 1995, 183–4). Yet 'economic science' lacks a theory of value in the Marxist sense. Their different 'languages' are mutually intelligible for this reason. The implication is that the superiority of 'critical economy' must be demonstrated through value theory.

Marxist economics indicate his abiding interest in the three volumes of Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value* (see Q85162, Q1011537ii, Q1011538i).⁴ Avowing Marx's theory of value as his starting point, Gramsci follows Marx not only methodologically but substantively. Consider Gramsci's brief note on the "Unity in the constituent elements of Marxism" (Q7518; 1971, 402–3), one of several where he defines Marxism's core qualities. There he posits that the foundation of Marxism lies in "the dialectical development of the contradictions between man [*sic*] and matter (nature—material forces of production)." Gramsci discerns three constitutive elements within this dialectical development: the economic, political, and philosophical. Regarding the first, he writes, "In economics the unitary centre is value, alias the relationship between the worker and the industrial productive forces (those who deny the theory fall into crass vulgar materialism by posing machines in themselves—as constant and technical capital—as producers of value independent of the man who runs them)" (Q7518; 1971, 402–3).⁵ He thus saw value as the "unitary center," the fluid foundation of economics, and central to the tripartite unfolding of the manifold engagements of living labor with the world. His parenthetical critique underscores his emphasis on value for understanding social relations. Those who believe that profit comes from machines and thus fail to see that surplus value derives from labor are charged with, of all things, vulgar *materialism*. Not the usual critique—and one that only makes sense if Gramsci's 'unitary center' is value as theorized by Marx.⁶

2

Gramsci's references to value are not all axiological or theoretical. In the pre-prison writings, value arises as a core economic concept used to discuss the concrete challenges facing the Italian communists—for instance, in negotiating wages (i.e.,

4. Gramsci seems to have read the *Theories of Surplus Value* as edited and published by Karl Kautsky between 1905 and 1910.

5. Regarding this same passage, Bob Jessop (1997) writes: "Although Gramsci saw the discipline of economics as being largely concerned with 'value', he also located economic problems in their broader political, intellectual, and moral context." This statement is a non sequitur. Marx's value theory presumes that economic problems are located within these contexts.

6. In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci calls for 'universalizing' Ricardo's discoveries—presumably including the labor theory of value—through a critical historicism (Q101159; 1971, 400–1). Here, too, he explicitly follows Marx's lead, for Marx's theory of value was built in part by critically historicizing the concept of 'value' in *Theories of Surplus Value*. Gramsci emphasizes this debt to Marx. Commenting upon the basic requirements for an excellent economic textbook, Gramsci writes, "Any textbook of economic science cannot be divorced from a course in the history of economic doctrines. The so-called fourth volume of the *Critique of Political Economy* [i.e., Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value*] is in fact a history of economic doctrines ... The whole conception of critical economy is historicist (which does not mean that it should be confused with the so-called historical school of economics) and its theoretical treatment cannot be disentangled from a history of economic science" (Q1011537ii; 1995, 178). Gramsci's parenthetical comment is a useful reminder that his 'absolute historicism' should not be confused with empiricism.

the money price paid for labor power).⁷ Likewise in his *Prison Notebooks*, value forms the crucial basis for his conception of Fordism (which Gramsci relates to uneven international extraction of surplus value) and his criticism of the conventional theory of the economic crisis of the 1930s (Gramsci 1995, sections 3 and 4).⁸ Consider, for instance, his basic analytical approach to Fordism. In a series of notes (Q10II531–41vii; 1995, 424–35) that have not, perhaps, received the attention they deserve, Gramsci situates his analysis of Fordism against a critique of Croce's misreading of Marx's theory of value. Consider the first paragraph of Q10II33 (1995, 428–9).

A fundamental flaw is to be noted in Croce's essay on the tendential fall in the rate of profit. This problem had already been formulated in the first volume of the *Critique of Political Economy* [i.e., Marx's *Capital*], where relative surplus value and technical progress are spoken of being precisely the cause of relative surplus value; in the same point it is observed how a contradiction arises in this process, i.e. while on the one hand technical progress allows an expansion of relative surplus value, on the other it determines, by means of the change it introduces into the composition of capital, a tendential fall in the rate of profit which is then demonstrated in Volume III of [*Capital*]. To the theory expounded in Volume III, Croce presents the treatment contained in Volume I as an objection. In other words he expounds as an objection to the tendential law of the fall in the rate of profit the demonstration of the existence of a relative surplus value due to technical progress, without however even once mentioning Volume I, as if the objection had sprung from his brain, or was even the consequence of good sound sense. (However the texts of the *Critique of Political Economy* will have to be looked at again before putting forward this criticism of Croce's objection, a precaution which moreover must be understood for all these notes, which have been written to a very large extent on the basis of memory.)

Gramsci thus emphatically opposes Croce's reading with an interpretation of *Capital* that presumes the validity of Marx's value theory. And he stresses the need to return to the three volumes of *Capital* to develop his critique of Croce. I cite this passage because only a few notes later in the same notebook, Gramsci connects his critique of Croce's reading of Marx to his analysis of Fordism. He writes that the "tendential fall

7. For instance, analyzing the factory councils, Gramsci writes, "The rise of the [factory] delegates shows that negotiation about prices in the context of bourgeois competition, and administration of the means of production and masses of men, are two different functions. The first has what might be called a commercial objective: it consists in *establishing the value of the labour of a category of workers*, on a given bourgeois market, in order to sell it at the best possible price (a function exercised by the trade unions). The second has the potential objective of preparing men, bodies and concepts, through a continuous pre-revolutionary process of scrutiny, so that they may be equipped to replace the employer's authority in the factory and impose a new discipline on social life" (1919a, 114–5; my emphasis).

8. For interpretations of Gramsci as an economist, see Boothman (1991) and Cavallaro (1997). More recently, Mann (2009) offers a Gramscian reading of the present economic crisis; Ruccio (2009) discusses Gramsci's relation to economics and globalization; Krätke (1997, and forthcoming) criticizes the deemphasis of political economy in Gramscian studies.

in the rate of profit ... ought to be studied on the basis of Taylorism and Fordism. Are these not two methods of work and production that represent the progressive attempts to overcome the tendential law, getting around it by multiplying the variables in the conditions of the progressive rise in constant capital? (Q10II\$41vii; 1995, 433). His key observation here is that Fordism is a project that attempts to address the tendential fall in the rate of profit (and specifically the crisis of the 1930s). Notwithstanding Gramsci's admiration for Fordism—he recognized its dynamism and anticipated its success—he also saw that it would fail to resolve the underlying dynamic that gave rise to it: that is, competition-driven technical progress that leads to a crisis of capital accumulation. Gramsci's insight is all the more remarkable given that he wrote these lines while shut off from the world—and well *before* Fordism's consolidation as such! His ability to diagnose Fordism in these terms is only possible because, as he stresses, he is applying the basic framework provided by *Capital* to understand dynamic historical conditions. To which we might add that Gramsci takes one further step in relating these changing conditions to the changing forms of subjectivity: gender relations, religion, “the modification of the traditional type of worker,” and so on. This is a substantial, creative accomplishment. Yet again, the framework for his analysis of Fordism, he takes pains to specify, is Marx's.

These illustrations underscore that Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* treat Marx's theory of value as fundamental to an analysis of capitalism and the challenge of winning communist hegemony. This was already the case by 1919. That year, Gramsci's pre-prison writings indicate that he saw that any substantial political threat to capital would require challenging value as such. Gramsci's most important statements to this effect appear in an essay entitled “The Problem of Power,” published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* (1919b). There Gramsci describes “the source of bourgeois power” as rooted in “the formation of surplus-value.” This is, of course, a crystallization of volume 1 of *Capital*, from which Gramsci draws a key political lesson: the peasantry and proletariat must join to conduct a positive form of economic “sabotage” to attack the core of capitalist class power. In a passage describing the accomplishments of the corporative movement, he writes:

The corporative movement ... has concentrated a mass of nearly six million Italian workers ... It has banished the ‘free’ worker from the economic scene, and so paralysed the capitalist labour market. The conquest of the 8-hour day and a minimum wage are the outcome of this state of affairs in the labour market. The capitalist order of production has been rocked to its foundations by these achievements; the ‘freedom’ to exploit, to extract surplus-value from labour-power (profit for the capitalist, rent to the landowner, taxes to the State, tribute to the newspapers and hired killers of the big banks), has been limited and placed under the—albeit indirect—control of the proletariat. The economic foundations of capitalist organization, which reaches its apex in the bureaucratic-parliamentary State, have been destroyed, through the sabotage of the primary source of capitalist power: the freedom to extract surplus-value. (131)

Of course, Gramsci's claim that the “economic foundations of capitalist organization ... have been destroyed” is hyperbole. This passage is taken from an editorial intended equally to evaluate and motivate, one with less pessimism of

intellect than optimism of will. But what is critical here is that Gramsci defines “the economic foundations of capitalist organization” by “the freedom to extract surplus-value.” Today Gramsci is best known as a theorist of hegemony. I know of no clearer statement than this where he specifies capitalist hegemony’s economic basis. And it is a restatement of Marx’s theory of value.

3

To conclude, the answer is yes: Gramsci was a Marxist. So perhaps those smiling geographers were right to smile and walk out on Professor Finocchiaro? I am not so sure. After all, the arguments he put forth *still stand*: which is to say that there are very few substantive ways to interpret Gramsci as a Marxist, and the most important—on the question of value—has not been emphasized. If this is correct, then an interesting question arises. Why has the fact that Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is grounded in Marx’s critique of political economy been so consistently deemphasized or ignored?

Let me propose the following. In a common reading of Gramsci, we find the equations Marx = economism while Gramsci = hegemony (i.e., antieconomism). But this is a false opposition. Some readers of Gramsci have avoided all traces of ‘economism’ in the *Prison Notebooks*, even suggesting that his Marxism disavowed economic analysis. Without a doubt, Gramsci aimed at destroying economism (Wolff 1989, 50). Yet just because he was severely critical of Marxist economism does not mean that he was not a Marxist economist. On the contrary, it only means that he saw economism as a distortion of Marx’s economic (value) theory—and rightly so. Indeed, Gramsci’s novel contributions to Marxism *presuppose* Marx’s critique of political economy. Thus, his reflections on Marxist economics bring us back to its essential insights. He was critical of Marxism for its lack of rigor and exactness in economic analysis (Q15543; 1995, 175). To be Gramscian, then, we should apply the same rigor to his thought.

Some readers of Gramsci have suggested that he simply overlooked political economy in his *Notebooks*. For instance, in the introduction to a symposium on Joseph Buttigieg’s translation of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, David Ruccio argues:

[F]or all their richness . . . political economy appears to be largely overlooked. It’s not that Gramsci was uninterested in economics . . . But it appears that . . . Gramsci was drawn to the concerns raised in some Marxist texts and not others. The fact that he focused his attention on questions of ideology, hegemony, and the state and not on other questions, such as those suggested by commodity fetishism, the appropriation of surplus-value, and the accumulation of capital, forces us to recognize that, while Gramsci opens up and adds to one wing of the Marxian tradition, much work remains to be done to integrate his insights into other wings of that tradition. (2006, 5–6)⁹

9. Thanks to Kenan Erçel for drawing my attention to this passage.

I hope that it is now clear that this generalization was too hasty. In a subsequent paper, Ruccio (2009) returns to Gramsci to reconsider class. I would argue that Gramsci's originality partly concerns his reinvigoration of Marx's theory of class—in a way that presupposes Marx's value theory as the framework. For Marx, value relations in capitalism are class relations and vice versa. Gramsci's careful commentary on social groups (including 'subaltern social groups') in the *Prison Notebooks* provides an analysis of class, albeit one that never firmly fixes the boundaries around classes but rather sees within each class formation an ensemble of overlapping social groups. His approach is emphatically not a pluralism, but rather an open Marxism rooted in analysis of complex class processes. This is the real meaning of Gramsci's emphasis on value for class analysis: he affirms that the proletariat is defined as such by its place vis-à-vis value form—as a 'subaltern social group'—and yet also shows that this is not the end of the story.

Earlier I noted that Finocchiaro's question seemed to foreclose the possibility that Gramsci may have been a Marxist on *political* grounds. Clearly Gramsci's argument that the value of revolutionary activities should be measured against their contribution to the "reorganization of the world economy" is unmistakably Marxist in this sense; we could therefore reply to Finocchiaro's question on this basis. This would be, I think, the standard reply. Yet to do so may well presuppose a coherence to the concept of 'Marxist politics' that is less real than imagined. Gramsci's writings on economics, I suggest, are useful in illuminating the complications of putting Marxist theory to work politically. As is well known, in the conclusion to *Capital*, Marx anticipated the end of capitalism as a result of the intensification of capital's own internal contradictions. Gramsci called the Bolshevik revolution a "revolution against *Capital*" (1917, 34–7) because Russia won its revolution via Lenin's vanguardist seizure of a weakened state, not because of the development of contradictions in capitalism. If we take Gramsci's interpretation to be correct, then the subsequent rise of Stalinism represented a sort of counterrevolution against *Capital*; like all counterrevolutions, it did not reinstate what came earlier. Marx's critique of capitalism in *Capital* had no real meaning for Stalin—but it did for Gramsci. Today, in the wake of the Stalinist nightmare, our reading of Gramsci must coincide with a return to *Capital* and thus to Marx's theory of value.

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